

## The Main Effort Primer

Endnotes added by Colonel E.M. Walters

From MCDP 1-3 *Tactics* (pp. 32-33)

The main effort is a central maneuver warfare concept: concentrating efforts on achieving objectives that lead to victory. Of all the actions going on within our command, we recognize one as the most critical to success at that moment. The unit assigned responsibility for accomplishing this key mission is designated as the main effort—the focal point upon which converges the combat power of the force.

The main effort receives priority for support of any kind. It must be clear to all other units in the command that they must support that unit in the accomplishment of its mission. The main effort becomes a harmonizing force for a subordinate's initiative. Faced with a decision, we ask ourselves: How can I best support the main effort?

Some actions may support the main effort indirectly. For example, a commander may use other forces to deceive the enemy as to the location of the main effort. Marine forces used this concept extensively in conducting a series of combined arms raids prior to the ground offensive in Operation Desert Storm. The raids were to confuse the Iraqis as to the true position and intention of the Allied forces. "The raid force appeared in the middle of the night and fired from positions the enemy had every right to believe were unoccupied."

Use of the main effort implies the use of economy of force. This term does not mean that we use as little force as we think we can get a way with. Rather, it means that we must not fail to make effective use of all the assets available to us. Forces not in a position to directly support the main effort should be used to indirectly support it. Such forces might be used to distract the enemy or to tie down enemy forces that might otherwise reinforce the threatened point. Uncommitted forces can be used in this effort by maneuvering them in feints and demonstrations that keep the enemy off balance.

While a commander always designates a main effort, it may shift during the course of a battle as events unfold. Because events and the enemy are unpredictable, few battles flow exactly as the commander has planned. As a result, the commander must make adjustments. One way is by redesignating the main effort. For example, if Company A is designated the main effort but runs into heavy enemy resistance while the adjacent Company B makes a breakthrough that exploits a critical vulnerability, the battalion commander may designate Company B as the main effort. This new designation of Company B as the main effort must not, however, be merely nominal. It means that the combat power which was supporting Company A now shifts to support Company B.

Identifying the main effort is the principal and most important answer to the question, "How do we achieve a decision?"

From Armchair General Magazine Website—Tactics 101 series:  
<http://www.armchairgeneral.com/tactics-101-main-and-supporting-effort.htm>

## MAIN AND SUPPORTING EFFORT

*Consequently, the forces available must be employed with such skill that even the absence of absolute superiority, relative superiority is attained at the decisive point.” Clausewitz*

All too often it is tempting to leap forward in planning and simply declare that we “need to take that hill” or “Colonel X’s outfit is the one to do the job”. This is knee jerk tactics in the selection of the task and the command to perform it. We know better so let’s do a quick review (we’ll revisit some of these topics at a later time):

- We received our mission from our commander and conducted a detailed **mission analysis**
- We analyzed the **terrain** and the **enemy**
- We analyzed our own **troops available** and **time available**
- We determined a **decisive point**
- We determined the **purpose** behind allocation of forces (the effect they are to accomplish)
- We determined what actions or **tasks** would best achieve the desired purpose
- With all that behind us we can now designate the **main and supporting efforts** of our course of action.

To find the main effort we have to go back to our decisive point. We will review just what it is we want to happen there because this is where we intend to win the battle. This is where the main effort will go. The main effort’s purpose is our overall unit purpose. It’s his job to win the fight for our larger unit. In other words, the main effort company of our battalion is the company assigned the mission essential task and purpose that allows us to accomplish our assigned mission.

However, if our main effort unit could win the fight alone, we wouldn’t need the rest of our unit in the battle. It is a cardinal rule that we should expend no more or less energy than is necessary to attain victory. Invariably, the main effort will need help and that is what we, as his higher HQ and commander, provide. We will shape the battle for him by assigning supporting efforts that help the main effort to succeed.

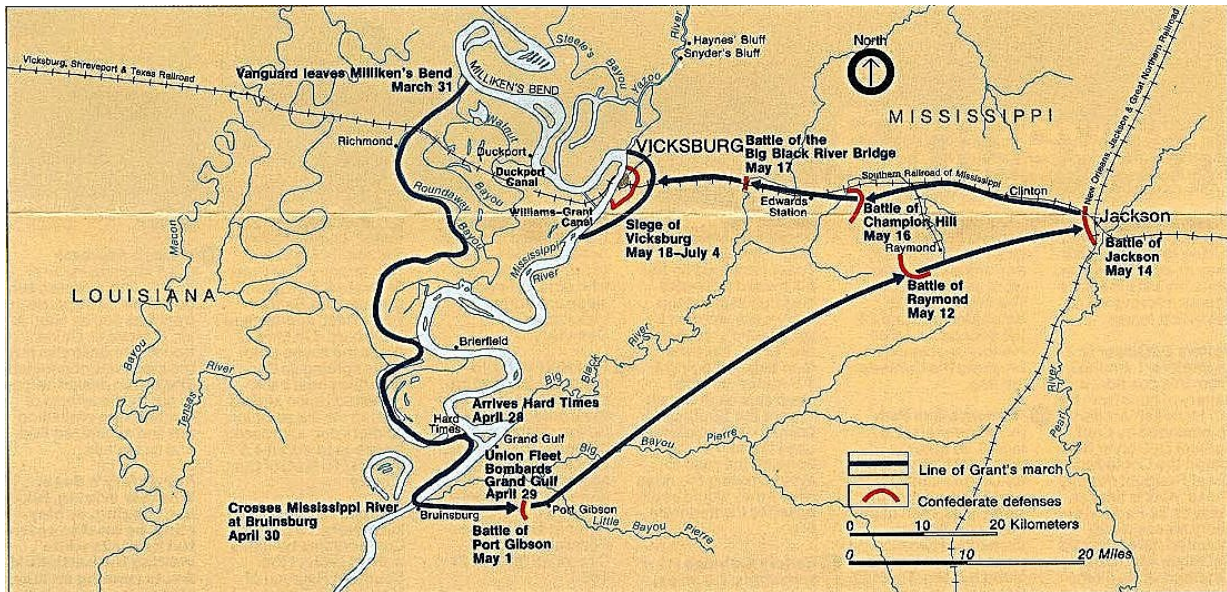
The main effort task and purpose at the decisive point guides the development of the supporting efforts tasks and purposes. In other words, there is a main effort, several supporting efforts, and then there is wasted effort. If all the actions of all parts of our unit fail to contribute to the success of the main effort at the decisive point then they are wasted efforts. With resources so critical and finite, no reputable commander can afford any wasted effort.

Main and supporting efforts exist at all levels and are related to one another in such a manner as to allow the entire unit to trace the path of the main effort down to the

lowest tactical unit. During Operation Iraqi Freedom, the Coalition Forces Land Component Command (CFLCC) was Central Command's main effort. The Air, special force, and naval component commands all contributed to CFLCC's success. CFLCC's main effort was V Corps and the MEF contributed to their success. V Corps main effort was the 3rd Infantry Division and the other divisions contributed to their success. 3rd ID's main effort was 2d Bde and the other brigades contributed to their success. 2Bde's main effort was the armor battalion that led the Thunder Run into Baghdad and all other battalions supported that effort. And so on... In the end, all units on the battlefield, in one way or another either directly or indirectly supported the success of the Thunder Runs in Baghdad which precipitated the collapse of Saddam's regime.

Let's look at a hypothetical mission. Let's say our commander has assigned our unit the task of seizing an enemy position along a critical enemy line of communication (LOC). Our main effort force is assigned the task of seizing the position, our main objective, with the purpose of severing the enemy LOC thus facilitating future offensive operations, our overall purpose. Our supporting efforts will enable the main effort to succeed by helping to isolate the main effort's objective. To do this they will conduct supporting attacks against adjacent units in order to prevent them from reinforcing the enemy on the objective. They will block routes of ingress and egress to further isolate the enemy on the objective. Our artillery will fire suppression on the objective to keep the enemies heads down in order to allow the main effort to close on them. We will fire on enemy artillery that supports the defenders defense (on our main efforts objective). We will hunt down and eliminate their early warning outposts to deny the enemy of early warning of the main efforts approach and we might conduct feints or diversionary attacks to make the enemy on the main objective think he is not the main target. If we attack some distant unit or chase after a fleeing force that can in no way help the enemy on our main objective then we are wasting effort. All of our units are focused on helping the main effort succeed on the main objective of our attack. It's all about teamwork!

The above discussion is based on General Grant's mission at Vicksburg. His main effort attacked the Confederate force while his supporting efforts shaped the battle. Grants cavalry conducted a series of raids behind enemy lines in order to create confusion and pull the defenders attention away from the advance of the main effort. Upon the final approach to the fort, Grant sent General Sherman east towards Jackson Mississippi, in the opposite direction of the main objective of Vicksburg. Why waste your best commander on a mission not directly oriented on the overall objective? Sherman's actions chased away an adjacent confederate Army under General Johnston that could have reinforced General Pemberton at Vicksburg. Sherman isolated the main objective for the main effort attack at Champion Hill which in turn forced Pemberton into the walls of his fort on the river. Meanwhile, the navy blockaded the river to the south thus denying reinforcement and resupply and bombarded Vicksburg thus beginning the reduction of the defenses. All efforts contributed to Grant's main effort of seizing Vicksburg and dividing the Confederacy.



It is interesting to note that Grant always assigned the supporting effort to his best commander. Why not put your best man at the decisive point, you may ask? This gets into the art of designating, weighting or resourcing, and sustaining the main effort. Simply put, as the overall commander of the operation, Grant would be with the main effort so he didn't need his best subordinate to be there as well. Better to assign your best man and unit to a critical supporting or shaping effort since he must operate without your direct guidance.

For the same reason, it is not always the best course of action to beef up your main effort unit by assigning him all sorts of additional combat power. You may actually hinder his ability to maneuver effectively if you tie all your combat multipliers to his unit since he incurs the task of command and control for all the additional assets. It might be better to keep him as lean as possible and allow others in less critical positions to direct additional combat power. This is why a separate breach force breaks through enemy barriers and obstacles. The breach force has all the engineering assets required to get through tank ditches, wire, and minefields and he creates a path that the main effort simply charges through on the way to the objective.

In summary, the main effort is the unit that we assign to accomplish the task and purpose at the decisive point. This is the unit we envision winning the battle for us. We will assign supporting efforts that will shape the battlefield in order to help the main effort succeed. Remember to keep in mind: 1) Do not have any wasted efforts on the battlefield. Resources are too precious! 2) You (The Commander) will normally position yourself with the main effort. 3) The battlefield is always changing and consequently, your main effort and supporting efforts could change. You (The Commander) must see this and make the change. That is the art of command.

From William S. Lind, *Maneuver Warfare Handbook* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1985).

### **Lecture III: The Main Effort**

**Colonel Michael D. Wily**

The commander, in making his plan, must determine what and where his main effort is in every operation, whether it be offensive, defensive, or withdrawal. This main effort should be specified in the operation order. It should always be clearly stated in paragraph 3a, The Concept of Operations.

There can only be one main effort. When you start giving two or three or a three-part main effort, you had better look back at it because the chances are you have not made up your mind what you are trying to do.

Every unit commander down to the company commander will always assign a main effort and sometimes even the platoon commander should. The company commander will assign the main effort to one of his platoons. The battalion commander will assign it to one of his companies, the regimental commander to one of his battalions. This platoon, company or battalion that is assigned the main effort may be reinforced. It could even be two companies, but generally, it should be assigned to a single element. The main effort is supported by the entire command.

Think for a moment at the regimental level. The regimental commander assigns a main effort to a battalion. The entire regiment, everything that belongs to that regiment, will support that battalion. Let us say it is 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion. I, as the regimental commander, will give that battalion the benefit of everything I have. I will give them the benefit of my tanks, my artillery, and my logistic support. I will give them the benefit of my air. That does not mean that all these arms will be attached to the main effort battalion. They may be, if appropriate. But they will be doing things that support what that main effort battalion commander is doing. The main effort battalion should receive priority on mobility: trucks, helicopters and everything that helps him move.

The entire command must be aware of what and where the main effort is. The commander can change the main effort at any time. This is what gives the operation its fluidity.

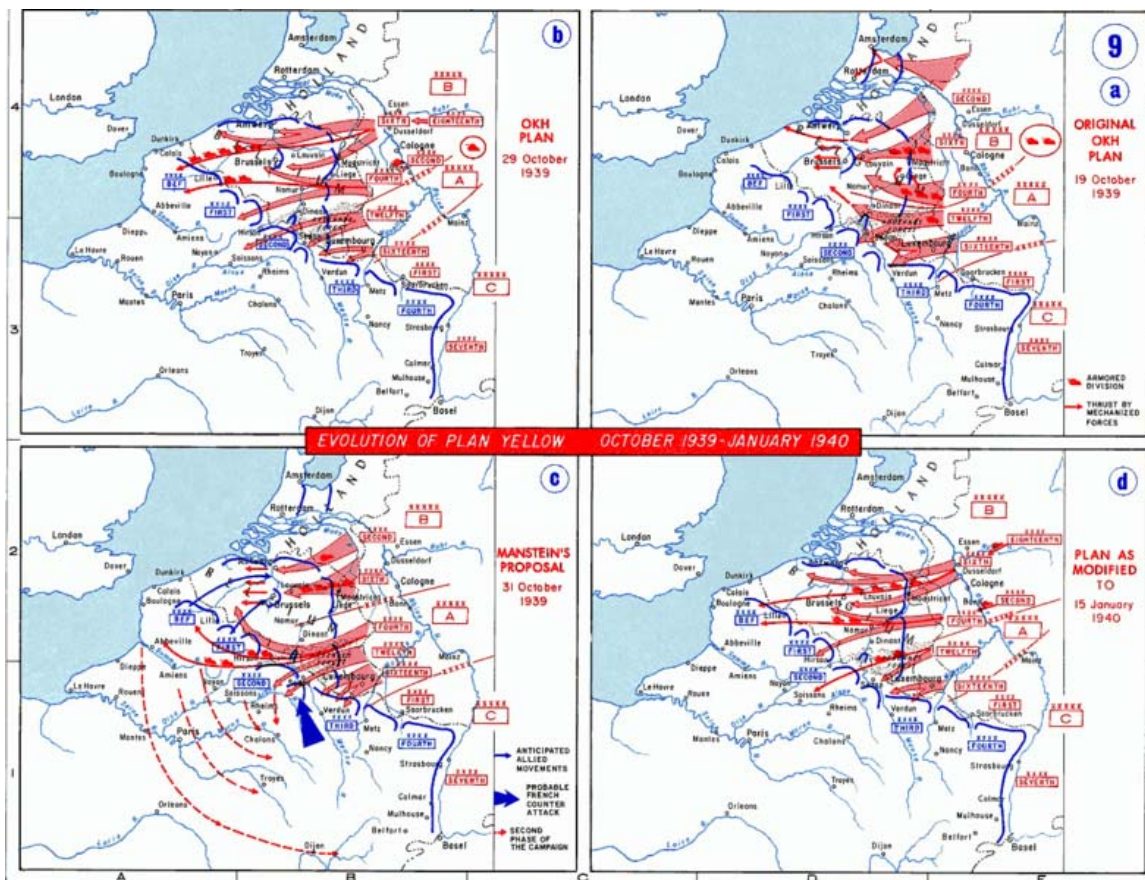
Here are a few examples of how the main effort works. Most of these historical examples, in fact all of them, will come from the Germans. It is not out of any particular love for the Germans, but because only the Germans had this concept and used it consistently in their tactics. You could find plans and operations of other countries that seemed to encompass the use of a main effort but it would be grasping for likenesses of main efforts, trying to make main efforts out of things that were not conceived as such. Since the Germans are the ones who developed the concept and used it consciously, it is only logical that the main effort be demonstrated from German operations.



The German word for the main effort is Schwerpunkt. Anytime in your readings when you see that, and often you will see it written in italics, the German word, Schwerpunkt, take note because it is one of the most important and underlying concepts in everything the Germans do.

One of the clearest historical examples of the Schwerpunkt, or main effort, can be seen in the battle of France in 1940. This of course is a strategic example but, as such, it is one about which you can find a good deal of source material to read and reread until you understand. You can apply the concept quite well at the operational or the small unit tactical level.

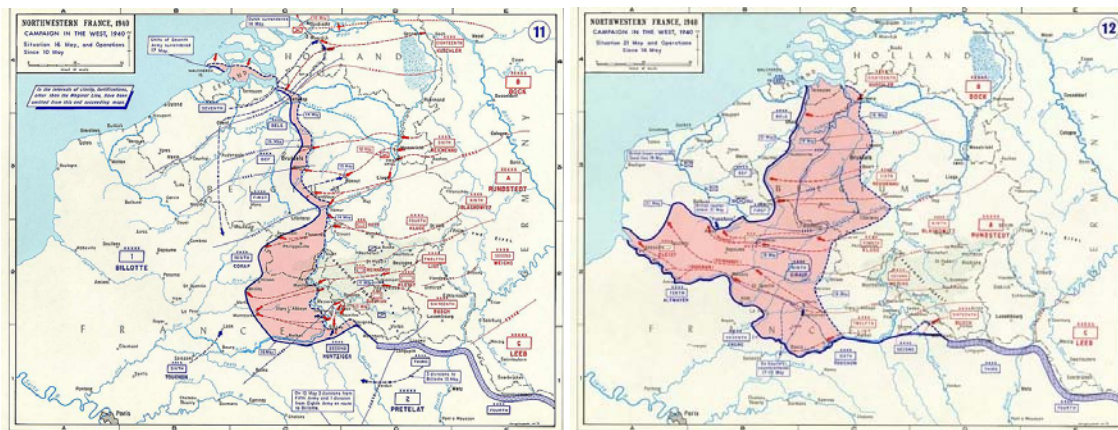
Consider then the German invasion of France in World War II. The initial plan devised by the high command was to attack through the low countries, Belgium and the Netherlands. They would conduct subsidiary actions in the south through the Ardennes mountains. That is, the main effort would be to the north, or to the right, through the low countries. Secondary efforts would be on the left. This was precisely what was planned for World War I in accordance with the Schlieffen Plan.



*Evolution of the German Campaign Plan for the Invasion of France*

Because it was a repeat of a plan that had previously been tried and that had previously failed, some German generals did not like the idea, in particular Erich von Manstein. He argued strongly that the Schwerpunkt should not be on the right. Manstein was convinced that the enemy would expect the attack to come through the low countries. The avenues of approach were better there. There were more roads. The Germans could move more quickly, it would seem. But, because they would be expected by the enemy, Mainstein argued progress would in fact be slowed if not stopped by enemy action. Manstein also realized that the enemy thought that a major tank attack through the Ardennes would be impossible. In the Ardennes, Manstein supposed that the enemy would be weak. There they could surprise the enemy; therefore, that should be the main effort.

Manstein persevered to overcome many objections. Finally, he convinced Hitler that the main effort should be on the left. It worked. They attacked through the Ardennes. They put their strength there, sending seven of their ten Panzer divisions through the Ardennes which it was thought would be impossible for tanks to traverse. The remainder of their forces went through the low countries and the British and French went to meet them there. In other words, the enemy strength was on the German right which was not their main effort. The German left, which continued to be the main effort, punched through enemy weakness, completely disrupting the French and British armies. They overran France in six weeks.



*Progress of the German Invasion of France, May 1940*

Consider this same thing on the tactical level. Make the main effort where the enemy least expects you. Make the main effort where the enemy is weak. But be prepared to be surprised. Be leery of the counsel, “Do not ever be surprised.” In war you will be surprised. The task is to learn to deal with surprise. If what you thought would be enemy weakness becomes enemy strength, you should not be disrupted. If your tactics are fluid you can deal with surprise. You will shift your main effort to enemy weakness and go on through. That is how the main effort works in the offense.

Remember, every operation must have a main effort. Never say, "This is the approach march, there is no main effort." Never say "This is the defense, this is the withdrawal, so no main effort is needed." Always there is a main effort and that main effort reflects what you are trying to do. For instance, "Attack through the Ardennes and proceed to the English Channel; therefore, main effort is such-and-such Panzer corps."

The main effort should be directed against enemy weakness, not enemy strength. Here you see the interconnection between the concepts, the connection between the concept of the main effort and the concept of surfaces and gaps. All the concepts work together at the same time. The main effort cannot be understood in isolation from surfaces and gaps because it is directed against enemy weakness.

Say that in our ever-changing enemy situation on the battlefield you direct your main effort at a point of enemy weakness and suddenly the enemy reinforces there so that what was a point of enemy weakness becomes a point of enemy strength. At this time, the main effort should be shifted to a new point. If Company A, as the main effort, struck enemy strength, and it cannot be withdrawn easily, the solution would be to designate another company, perhaps Company B, as the new main effort and have it pass through a point of enemy weakness. In so doing, the enemy, forced to react, may well take the pressure off of Company A. This gives the battlefield fluidity. Because the battalion commander has the latitude to make changes like this on his own without permission, he is also applying the concept of mission tactics. So, again you see an interconnection between the concepts. They work together.

Consider the defense. The commander will decide where he thinks the enemy will attack. He will try to read himself into the mind of the enemy and determine where it is logical the enemy will go. He can only do this if he studies closely the characteristics of his opponent.

He designates a main effort based on what he expects his enemy to do. Again, his tactics are fluid. All things in war are unpredictable. If the enemy does not come where you want him to come, we must be prepared to shift the main effort, but there will always be a main effort.

Some if this sounds very alien to the American concept of defense. In 1953, German General Franz Halder completed a critique of the U.S. Army Tactical Doctrine. The item he was most critical of was American understanding of the defense. He read the Army Field Manual 100-5 and saw where it said that the defense is used only to gain time, to regroup before going back on the offensive, or to hold terrain. He said the Americans do not understand what the defense is for. The defense is another way of getting at the enemy. It is another way of destroying him.

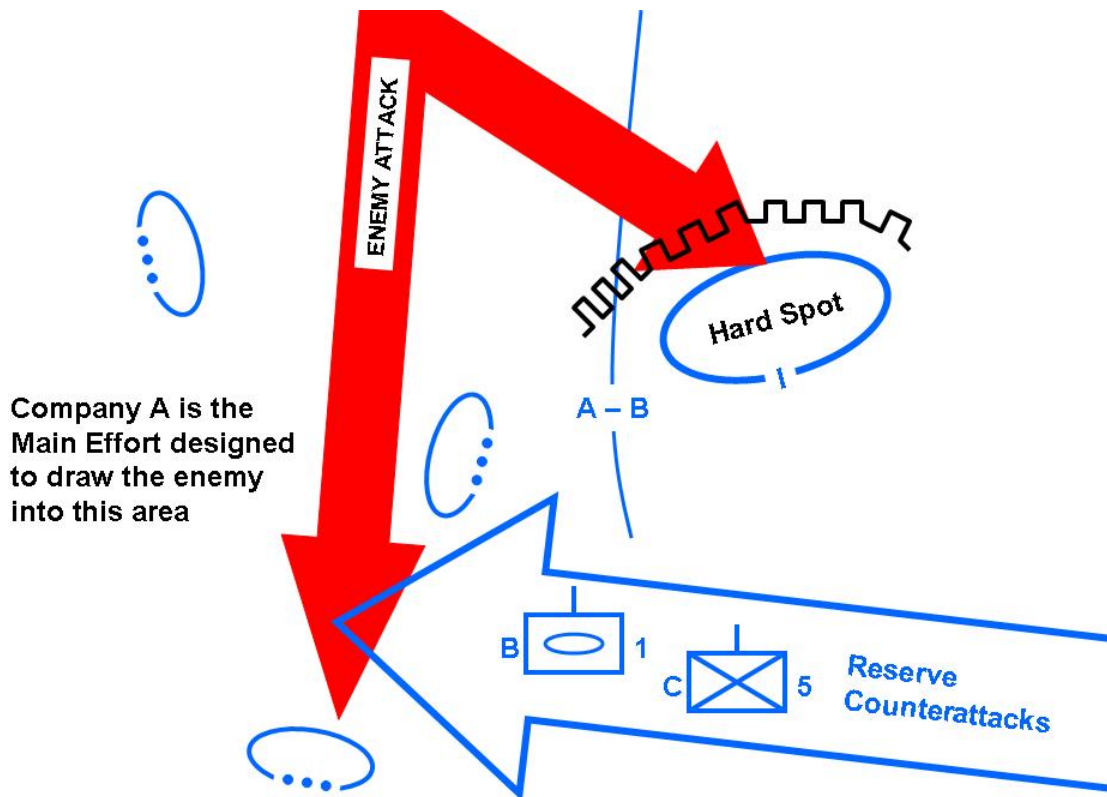
Therefore, choose a main effort. Study how Napoleon went on the defensive at Austerlitz to draw his enemy in and render one of the most decisive defeats in



history. After the battle, Napoleon, in the exuberance of victory, said, "It seemed that I was in command of both armies!" His enemy had fallen for his trap perfectly.

See on the diagram where the commander has decided to make his left appear to be a weak spot. He will try to draw the enemy in there. The enemy has two alternatives here. He may enter through the weak spot on our left or he may attack the hard spot on our right. Either will get him into trouble. If he attacks the hard spot on the right, he is attacking a dug-in, fortified enemy and he will sustain casualties. If he goes through the weak spot he has been drawn into our trap. Of course, if he attacks the hard spot we will try to use fluid tactics, change the main effort, and make that be a trap too.

Let us now presume that he attacks on our left. In so doing, he exposes his flank to us. Once he does that we designate the reserve the main effort and commit it as shown.



Of course, you will have more than one plan for committing the reserve, but the example shows one way that the reserve can be used to come in for the decisive blow. So a large reserve is something which always must be held in offensive or defensive combat and it should, when committed, support or become the main effort.

Though German examples have been used here, the main effort is not something alien to other peoples' warfare, though usually in other armies it is less clearly defined. Consider our own principles of war, which we got from the British in the 1920s, and you will see vestiges of the main effort in them.

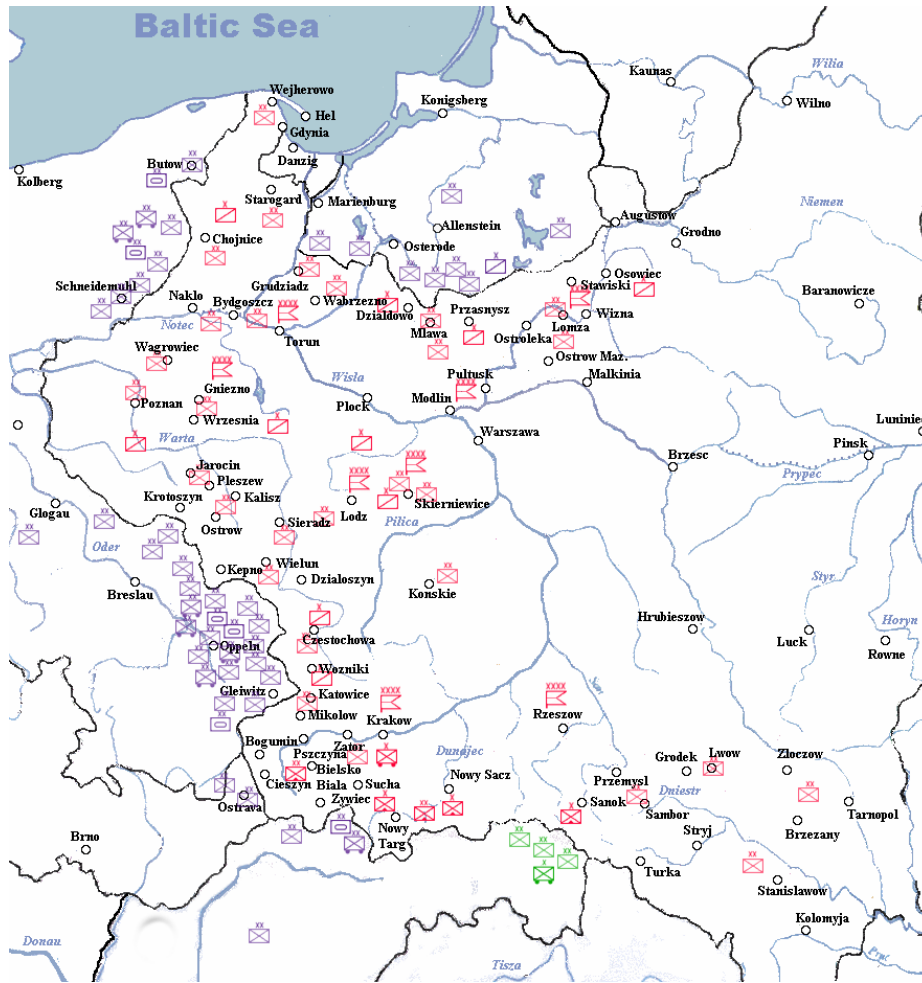
Consider the principle of the objective. Remember, the main effort is where you determine you are going to do something decisive. That should be what you do when you select an objective. Therefore, there is a relationship.

Consider the principle of mass. The Germans put seven of their ten Panzer divisions in the main effort on a narrow front and left their other three on the boarder front to the right. But they massed their forces against enemy weakness with the main effort. Mass is one of our U.S. Army's principles of war and when Nathan Bedford Forrest said, "Get thar fustest with the mostest," he was saying something about the principle of mass.

The principle of economy of force is also there in the main effort. Your assets are always going to be limited. Therefore, decide what you are going to do and use your assets to best effect by placing them where they will do the most good, against enemy weakness. That way you preserve your assets. You do not dissipate them and lose them by throwing them against enemy strength.

Even the principle of simplicity can be recognized in the concept of the main effort. Instead of trying to do ten different things, we are focusing on one. There will be many other efforts going on at the same time but all in some way directed at making the main effort succeed.

So what do you gain from this main effort? You gain direction. You gain fluidity. You gain speed. And you prevent dissipating your efforts all over the battlefield, the way the Poles did when the Germans invaded Poland. They tried to defend their entire 800-mile front. There was no main effort and by trying to be strong everywhere they were in fact strong nowhere. This trying to "cover all the bases" is a common error in the amateur commander's plan. It is a symptom of avoidance of decisionmaking.



*German (blue) and Slovakian (green) versus Polish (red) dispositions, Sept 1939*

By establishing a main effort, you make a clear decision. You obviate the necessity for juniors to keep asking for guidance. If they know their commander's main effort, they can continue to operate even though communications may be cut, and they can continue to operate at a high tempo because they need not keep checking back for new orders.

Also, by always having a main effort, you provide an answer to those who worry that with the concepts of surfaces and gaps and mission tactics forces will be straying willy-nilly about the battlefield. They are not doing so because they know what the main effort is. A photograph of their activities from an airplane might appear to be a picture of willy-nilly movement about the battlefield. It is, in fact, nothing of the kind. If it appears shapeless and thereby confuses the enemy, that is very good. Every subordinate knows his commander's intent and his mission. Every subordinate knows his commander's main effort and he makes his decisions based on those three things.

You will be given exercises in which you will be required to select your main effort. You must do exercises in which you are required to choose your main effort quickly and shift it quickly. You should always be able to respond succinctly and definitively to the question, "What is your main effort right now?" That answer should be very brief. Your mission order may be longer. It may have the phrase, "in order to." It will show why such-and-such a unit is your main effort. But the main effort is succinct. "My main effort is 1<sup>st</sup> platoon; my main effort is 3<sup>rd</sup> Battalion." The unit you designate and its mission are the focus of your effort.

When the commander has made this decision he has done something very necessary. He has done something very ethical. He has assumed and taken responsibility. For what will happen if the battle goes awry? He cannot blame his subordinates. He can only blame himself. It was he who decided what was to be done and designated a main effort in order to do it. Therefore, it takes courage and moral character to select a main effort. That is why the weak commander and the amateur so often fail to do this. In fact, the weak commander will actively avoid choosing a main effort. It is very convenient for the commander weak in character to avoid selecting a main effort because, if the battle goes unfavorably, he can blame someone else for the mistake. The commander who has taken a stand and selected his own main effort cannot do this. Therefore, in this sense, the main effort is a moral commitment.

The main effort underlies everything you do in battle. If I were asked to select any of these concepts as the most important, the main effort, Schwerpunkt, is that which I would select. Von Hindenburg made the statement: "Battle without a Schwerpunkt is like a man without character." The main effort is the most important element and the only element that gives the battle focus.